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AUTHOR Wharton, Clifton R., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

During the past few years, a great deal of thought and writing has focused on general education. While there is overall agreement that general education is central to higher learning and in need of rejuvenation and greater institutional commitment, there have been debates as to whether there is a rough equivalence between general education and basic skills and whether the content of general education constitutes a timeless part of higher education. This widespread concern with general education appears in contrast to two other trends in higher education, i.e., the surge in demand for career programs and the rise of educational consumerism. Both of these latter trends have flourished under the banner of "relevance." However, "relevance," like general education, is a concept that changes drastically with the times. In order to achieve a wider consensus on a stabilized role for general education, two questions should be considered. First, what overall philosophy should two-year institutions adopt toward general education, and second, what should the components of general education be in the future? To permit students to participate in a knowledge-centered society, general education should stress symbolic competencies, which encompass the use of written, oral, and mathematical signs; epistemological competence, which orients students to the structures of knowledge in their society; and cultural competence, which enriches the relationship of the individual to his/her milieu. (WL)

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Keynote Address
Annual Conference
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Education Association
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# GENERAL EDUCATION:

# STOPPING THE PENDULUM -- BUT CAN WE GET OFF?

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Clifton R. Wharton, Jr.
Chancellor
State University of New York

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I welcome the opportunity to take part in today's Third Annual Conference of the Community College General Education Association. Although the Association is a relatively new group, its activities have already contributed significantly to a growing reevaluation of general education in two-year institutions, both in New York State and beyond its borders.

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I predict that the Association will in years to come grow into a clear and articulate voice on behalf of vision in higher education, and I consider it a privilege to be able to share ideas with you at this early and exciting stage of your development as an organization.

I. The General Education Explosion

Let me begin by noting that general education is in the middle of an explosion of rhetoric.

The last few years have delivered up an extraordinary amount of thought and writing focused on general education. It would be an endless and probably pointless task to try to list everything, but a few highlights provide reference points.

-- At Harvard, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted in 1978 to reform the undergraduate curriculum by reasserting the importance of liberal learning. Dean Henry Rosovsky lent his name to the plan, which received extensive attention not only from professional educators but also from the general public via magazines such as Time and The New Yorker. Very probably because of the prestige of the institution where it originated, the Harvard-Rosovsky plan seems to have become a kind of Magna Carta for general education in the 1980s.

-- In 1981, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching issued a call for revitalized general education in American colleges and universities.

The Carnegie document stressed the importance of general education as a corrective for too much individualism and personal isolation in a society grown overconcerned with material and economic gain.

-- At about the same time, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation report on The New Liberal Arts explored the critical role of mathematics, technology, and particularly computer skills in general education. The Sloan report argued that most colleges and universities have been remiss in adjusting the general education concept and curriculum to a culture in which both quantum theory and Shakespearean drama are equally important -- and equally humanistic -- artifacts.

-- Also in 1981, The Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored report on The Humanities in America argued for the reintegration of humanistic education with technical, scientific, and career-oriented programs. Its authors viewed the humanities as imperiled by their removal from the real world of work, leisure, and governance -- and those activities as themselves impoverished by their lack of regular contact with the humanities.

These are far from the only examples, though they are certainly well-known ones. The American Council on Education is currently sponsoring a National Commission on Higher Education Issues, several of whose position papers directly address general education issues. In every state, and probably in very nearly every institution of higher learning, general education is the focus of a widening dialogue and debate.

The common theme of this great conversation is twofold: first, that general education is not merely a good thing, but that it is in fact central to higher learning itself. Second, that there is wide, perhaps universal agreement that general education has fallen on bad times at most American colleges and universities, and that it therefore is in need of rejuvenation and greater institutional commitment.

Let me observe that there are also themes about which agreement is not widespread or universal.

One of them is the assumption of a rough equivalence between general education and basic skills or minimum educational competencies. There is a growing movement afoot in favor of various "educational warranties," standardized competency tests that are proposed to certify minimum levels of skill mastery, and hence to "guarantee" the college degree against declining value.

Many, perhaps most of these proposals are framed as appeals for improved general education, as if it and basic literacy were identical. Yet, the basics are verbal and quantitative skills, the capacity to understand and employ verbal and quantitative signs. "The basics," as I understand the colloquialism, mean just that: not the results of education (particularly higher education), but its fundamental building blocks.

Now, those who put basic and general education together commonly accomplish that by adding "analytical," "critical," and "synthesizing" skills to the language and numerical abilities already mentioned. If you think about it, you may wonder just how basic these latter capacities really are.

Indeed, I would argue that analysis, criticism, and synthesis are very sophisticated mental processes, and that methods for fostering them may well have little in common with educational approaches focused on basic literacy. Most of the research on basic literacy suggests that it is imparted most effectively in early childhood; hence the pertinent issue on basic literacy involves the relationships between primary, secondary, and postsecondary education. On the other hand, most educators seem to believe that criticism, analysis, and synthesis cannot, properly speaking, be "taught" at all, but rather must be exercised and developed. Higher education does not so much transmit the capacity for complex thinking as provide a setting, a stimulus and occasion for it. Hence, the organization of those settings and occasions is the true curricular question for institutions of higher learning.

Let me assure you I am not suggesting that colleges and universities abdicate responsibility for basic skills education, insofar as students come to us with needs that can be met only through developmental and remedial programs. As I have stressed elsewhere (Wharton 1979), the realities of a diversified but knowledge-intensive society demand that educators respond to students who differ not only by social and economic background but also in talent and scholastic background. Indeed, community colleges and other two-year institutions have been at the forefront of innovation and effectiveness in this area. At the same time, I believe that it is imperative for us to recognize that the aims of college-level general education go far beyond basic literacy and minimum verbal and mathematical competence. Our pedagogic practice must reflect this as clearly as our educational theories.

Another theme to which I want to take at least mild exception is the idea that the "content" of general education is the stable, almost timeless part of higher education -- there is a hint of that in the very phrase, "core curriculum." A moment's reflection recalls that the "core" curriculum of the Renaissance university was essentially philological and linguistic, radically unlike the "core" of natural philosophy that replaced it during the Enlightenment. The elite illusion of general education posits a body of eternally relevant knowledge, so that you still run across nostalgic evocations of the classical curricula of the private liberal arts colleges of the 19th century. In reality, of course, the content of general education has changed drastically with the times. If anything, the question is whether those continuities that apparently remain are significant or even real.

## II. The Pendulum of Relevance

All this soul-searching about general learning appears to contrast with two general trends in higher education: the career education boom and the rise of educational consumerism.

The extraordinary surge in demand for career programs was probably the single most arresting development in American higher education during the past decade. Moreover, it shows few signs of topping off. Students, and therefore colleges and universities, have placed an increasingly high premium on course work that provides practical skills for specific employment. The curricular consequences have been felt throughout the country, and at virtually every kind of college and university. In two-year institutions, one major result has been an erosion of the transfer function.

Even though most community colleges still give prominent visibility to curricula that prepare students to continue on to 4-year colleges and universities, the percentage of enrollees who actually do so has dropped throughout the last decade. According to Change magazine, when full-time and part-time students are considered together, along with everyone taking credit courses for any reason, less than 5 percent each year transfer as juniors to colleges and universities, even in states with thriving community college systems. (Cohen and Lombardi, 1979)

Paralleling the career education vogue has been an increase in a consumerist or "shopping basket" approach to course selection. More and more, students have opted to pick and choose among offerings, sometimes in the name of "individualized" learning, sometimes in putting special emphasis on career needs, and sometimes largely out of caprice.

For whatever reasons it has occurred, the consumerist approach has progressively undercut the traditional integrated curriculum, with its general education core, its sequences and prerequisites, its orderly patterns of majors, minors, concentrations, and cognates. In community colleges, consumerism has combined with newer practices of stopping-in and stopping-out, part-time, and goal-focused enrollment. The positive result has been a facilitation of lifelong education, allowing men and women to use two-year institutions as a community knowledge resource and undercutting the concept of the campus as what I have called a "city of youth." The negative side has been a certain fragmentation of learning, and a serious challenge to that concept of education that stresses the civilizing, acculturating effect of a fully-rounded educational experience.

Both the career education boom and the growth of educational consumerism have flourished under the banner of "relevance": the usefulness and value of education for achieving certain personal and social ends. That is all very well. Nevertheless, I cannot help recalling that what one generation finds relevant, another may view with indifference. Many of you will certainly recollect what "relevance" meant during the mid-to-late-1960s -- and it certainly was not business administration, engineering, and computer science. Indeed, for a sense of perspective it is good to remember that liberal learning -- the arts, humanities, social sciences in particular -- constituted the essence of "relevance" for quite a few years, enjoying the levels of enrollment and institutional priority that today seem to be claimed largely by courses in marketing, accounting, finance, information-processing, and so on.

It is this pendulum-swing of "relevance" that leaves me with at least some reservation about today's clamor for general education. Last year I tried to express it in a set of proposals for a "curriculum for the 21st century." At the time I remarked that:

> Despite their value...I consider the recurrent reexaminations of general education to be one of higher education's <u>idees fixes</u> -- a more than slightly questionable obsession we use too often to avoid confronting the real issues of social and technological change. Like the classic business cycle, the old general education cycle rolls around every three to seven years, and every three to seven years, it elicits the same alarms and excursions, the same flurry and rhetoric. (Wharton 1981)

In voicing this sort of doubt, I hope it will be clear that I am not challenging the importance and value of general education per se. Indeed, it has always been and remains my conviction that humanistic and liberal studies form the heart of the college and university experience, distinguishing education itself from mere training. What I am suggesting, rather, is that neither general education nor any other portions of the college curriculum derive any lasting benefit from the oscillations of the pendulum of relevance. Moreover, our ongoing, often anguished preoccupation with "relevance" can have the effect of absorbing time and resources that could better be spent in reaching and implementing wider consensus on a stabilized role for general education in the curriculum of higher education for the 1980s and beyond.

III. Two Questions

Let me pose two questions that seem to me to be of some importance.

First, what overall philosophy should two-year institutions adopt toward general education? There is both a paradox and a contradiction here. The paradox is that the unique mission of community colleges is integrally bound up with career and lifelong education -- the former at least in part implying training, and the latter at least in part implying educational consumerism. Of course, those are the very trends in reaction to which I earlier noted that the current general education debate has arisen.

The contradiction is that the present stress on vocationalism means that the two-year graduate who is not exposed to general studies within the community college curriculum probably will not be exposed to them at all.

With the increasing marginality of the transfer function, it is no longer viable (if it ever was) to assume that general education will somehow be picked up during subsequent matriculation at a four-year college or university. Hence on some campuses it appears that general education is being squeezed out of the two-year college curriculum at precisely the time it is in greatest need of being squeezed back into it.

How to resolve the problem? Candidly, I cannot agree with the suggestion put forward by some, that community colleges retreat from their career orientation in order to reform two-year curricula around a traditional general education framework. Practical skills building is intrinsic to the two-year college mission, and it is something they have accomplished with unparalleled success.

It would be difficult indeed to justify turning aside from a basic thrust that has compiled so outstanding a record of accomplishment.

It is all very well to say that general education in two-year colleges must complement general education by fostering "learning to learn" skills -- but I believe we must go further and be more specific. In doing so, we will confront a second basic question: that is, what should be the components of general education for the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond?

To answer that, I suggest we merge both general education and career education into a broad concept of educational competence. I use the term not in its common and colloquial sense, but rather in analogy to the specialized sense coined by the linguist Noam Chomsky.

In Chomsky's usage, "competence" designates a speaker's tacit grasp of the "deep structures" of language, the individual's ability not only to comprehend a vocabulary and syntax but also to manipulate them to fashion and make use of new meanings. Now, what I want to argue is that general education in two-year colleges should aim at creating or strengthening the competence of learners to comprehend, fashion, and use meanings in at least the following ways:

1. Symbolic competence should encompass the use of signs: written, oral, and mathematical. Symbolic competence corresponds closely to basic literacy skills, but it also should include greater stress on such things as foreign languages -- particularly non-Western languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Eastern European tongues.

These latter are not subjects that have frequently found their way into community college curricula. Yet as what might be called the "emerging languages" of the 21st century, they will be immensely important for pragmatic as well as other reasons.

2. Epistemological competence should orient students to the structures of knowledge in the society in which they live -- a scientific, technologically centered community requiring new skills in information and knowledge management. That will mean better preparation in general science and mathematics, along with courses in technology and social change. I am very much of the opinion that it means computer literacy as well.

Although pen and paper were for centuries the basic media for the recording and exchange of ideas, increasingly the calculator and the keyboard are taking their place. General education -- in all institutions as well as the community colleges -- has an obligation to acknowledge and take into account this fundamental transformation.

3. Finally, <u>cultural competence</u> corresponds perhaps most closely to that larger sense of general education that the academic community has traditionally considered the bedrock of higher learning. It has to do with the richness of an individual's relation to his or her milieu.

Its essence is the quantity and quality of human participation -- civic participation, participation in personal relationships, participation in the artistic and cultural heritage of contemporary society. Yet having said that this traditional notion resembles what I mean by cultural competence, I must also point out that each new generation, each succeeding "higher education cohort," reinterprets tradition in its own way. Hence a general education curriculum for fostering cultural competence in the 21st century will have to do a great deal better than, for example, the venerable "Western Civilization" course or cognates if it is to explore history and the humanities in any adequate way.

Instead, it will have to prepare students for life in a whole series of overlapping communities: family and home, workplace, state, nation, and world. In my personal view, the greatest urgency here lies in the area of internationalism. More than ever before, the "deep structures" of our culture are global citizens -- yet the average student has less interest in and knowledge of other cultures than at any time, perhaps, since the end of World War II. As regards curriculum, that implies not only more and better courses in foreign languages, but also much stronger offerings in world history, area studies, and non-Western approaches to science and the humanities.

IV. Conclusion

Some of these competences may strike you as essentially identical to what general education has always sought to nurture. Others may appear more questionable, less practical given the actual reasons why most people enroll in community colleges today.

Yet it seems to me that the fundamental role of general education in two-year institutions may well be to broaden the concept of what is practical. The goal of general learning has always been that of producing the "educated person," in the widest and most fully rounded meaning of the term. In a knowledge-centered society, a wide and fully-rounded education is not simply a mark of distinction: it is a prerequisite for participation.

In community colleges as well as in other institutions, therefore, I believe it is time for us to damp the erratic swings of the pendulum of relevance. It is no longer a question of whether our curricula prepare our students for useful work. It is a question of making sure that we prepare them for the world.

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